

EFFECTS OF INTERNALIZED STIGMA OF MENTAL DISORDER ON QUALITY OF LIFE AND SELF-ESTEEM IN PANIC DISORDER PATIENTS

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Introduction: Internalized stigma is a subjective experience of stigma that includes devaluation, shame, secrecy and withdrawal triggered by application of negative stereotypes to oneself. There is a growing evidence of negative effects of internalized stigma on quality of life of patients with mental disorder. Still, there are very sporadic data on the degree to which internalized stigma influences the quality of life and self-esteem in panic disorder patients. It could be of great importance, as a review of literature indicates substantial impairment of the quality of life in panic disorder patients, which remains poor in the post-remission period.

Participants and methods: The study sample consisted of 40 treated outpatients with diagnosis of panic disorder, whose average age was 37.88 (SD=9.685) years and mean illness duration 6.436 (SD=7.126) years. Assessment instruments included the Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Manchester Short Assessment of Quality of Life and Beck Depression Inventory II. The questionnaire also included several socio-demographic and clinically related variables.

Results: Patients with panic disorder showed a moderate level of internalized stigma ($M=31.8$, $SD=9.685$). Patients with higher levels of internalized stigma had significantly poorer quality of life ($r=-.672$) and lower self-esteem ($r=-.434$). There was a positive correlation between the level of depressive symptomatology and the level of internalized stigma ($r=.696$). Patients who had longer duration of illness had higher levels of self-stigma ($r=.441$).

Conclusion: Internalized stigma correlated negatively with the quality of life and self-esteem and positively with depression. In order to improve the quality of life in panic disorder patients, we should increase awareness of the burden of internalized stigma and focus on it as one of treatment goals. We propose cognitive-behavioral interventions as a successful approach in managing self-stigma and the dysfunctional attitudes that lead to low self-esteem and depression and decrease in quality of life.

Key words: Internalized stigma of mental illness, quality of life, self-esteem